



Fast Facts

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES

FORENSIC ALCOHOL PROGRAM

Background

The proper conviction and removal of drunk drivers from California's streets and highways provides important public health and safety benefits. Annually, more than 1,000 California residents are killed in alcohol-related crashes, and thousands more are injured. Chemical testing to determine the concentration of alcohol in the blood of persons involved in traffic violations is a critical component of the state's efforts to control drunk driving. To enforce the state's driving under the influence (DUI) laws, there are 42 local forensic alcohol laboratories that conduct chemical testing of blood, breath, and urine.

The California Department of Health Services' Food and Drug Laboratory Branch's Forensic Alcohol Program (FAP) licenses and regulates these forensic alcohol laboratories. The goals of the FAP are to ensure the competency of the 42 local forensic alcohol laboratories, the qualifications of the employees of the laboratories, and the accuracy of breath alcohol testing procedures used by law enforcement agencies. Compliance with the requirements of the FAP regulations establishes the competence of the laboratories and the scientific validity of the forensic and breath alcohol analysis results, which can then be admitted into evidence in drunk driving cases. Reliable and accurate testing is required by California law enforcement agencies to ensure that drunk drivers are properly convicted and innocent drivers are not prosecuted unjustly because of faulty laboratory testing.

Program Activities

- **Proficiency testing of the laboratories.** FAP conducts regular proficiency tests of licensed and applicant laboratories in order to evaluate the accuracy of the forensic alcohol analyses performed by the laboratories. In addition, each employee of a laboratory is qualified based upon a proficiency test and a written examination. Presently, FAP conducts proficiency tests three times per year. However, in the near future, FAP will be able to conduct these tests four times per year. Quarterly proficiency testing will provide timely qualification of the employees of the laboratories and current evidence of the competence of laboratories and the tests performed.
- **On-site inspections of the licensed laboratories.** Each forensic alcohol laboratory's facility must be inspected regularly to ensure that all regulatory requirements are being met and that the laboratory is properly documenting its

procedures and using properly trained staff. With a planned augmentation to the program, FAP will be able to inspect each of the regulated laboratories at least once every two years.

- **Review and approval of laboratory methods and procedures.** FAP reviews methods and procedures submitted by licensed and applicant laboratories to determine that they meet the required standards of procedure and standards of performance set forth in the regulations. With a planned augmentation to the program, FAP will be able to reduce the time required to complete these reviews to 60 days.
- **Meetings of an advisory committee on alcohol determination.** The advisory committee is composed of representatives of groups involved in or affected by the forensic and breath alcohol analysis regulations (e.g., district attorneys, public defenders, coroners, pathologists, and analytical chemists). The committee is intended to provide the Department with a technical and professional perspective as to the impact of its regulations on forensic and breath alcohol analysis. The full committee last met in June 2000, and FAP convenes meetings of the advisory committee on a regular basis.